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Citation for published version:

Cairns, JW, *1715: Jacobitism and the Survival of Great Britain*, 2014, Web publication/site, Edinburgh Legal History Blog. <<http://www.elhblog.law.ed.ac.uk/2014/12/13/1715-jacobitism-and-the-survival-of-great-britain/>>

Link:

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Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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The Edinburgh Legal History Blog

1715: Jacobitism and the Survival of Great Britain

Posted on [13/12/2014](#) by [John Cairns](#)

An exhibition on the Jacobite Rebellion of 1715 has just opened in the National Library of Scotland. Drawing on popular culture, it has been named “Game of Crowns”, setting it as an opposition between the Houses of Orange, Hanover and Stewart. It consists of a wealth of material, including loans by Her Majesty the Queen from the Royal Archives, and by the National Museums of Scotland, National Records of Scotland, and Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

It is a difficult story to tell using archival material without overwhelming it with explanation. It has been judged well. There is, however, rather a lot to take in. Likewise it has little that is visually attractive: there was only one original portrait, a miniature of the Old Pretender, strangely described as James VIII – a claim he never made good. (The description of him as such is also used on the Library’s excellent website – one assumes no lèse-majesté intended against the present monarch!) On the other hand, your blogger rather likes looking at yellowed, original documents. Perhaps more could have been done to bring out the intellectual debates; but perhaps that reflects the nature of the archival material drawn on. But to “sex it up”, there is much emphasis placed on an order relating to the Glencoe Massacre, while to attract the young, it is possible to decipher coded letters, and play a ‘Top Trumps’ card game.

Of course, the Rebellion failed. The exiled Stewarts were then expelled from France, ultimately residing in Rome. The governing classes of the British Isles maintained their state that balanced the power of the Crown with the authority of the aristocracy and the elected representatives of those who counted politically. One does not need to subscribe to a Whig view of history to see the significance of that and its importance in the political and economic development of Britain through the eighteenth century: a setting that allowed Enlightenment to flourish in Scotland.

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